



## Opinion

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# Guest Column: Telecommunication technology aids in making Texas better

Jerry Patterson

AUSTIN - I have been impressed by how today's technologies have improved significantly the services offered by the General Land Office to the people of Texas.

For example, our veterans program loaned more than \$1 billion to Texas veterans in 2004, due in part to the increased use of electronic technology, including the Internet. The Web also has revolutionized Save Texas History, our historic conservation program.

Through this program, Texans can view and buy historic map replicas online.

Revenue generated by these sales is dedicated to conserving more historic treasures. We've also seen sea changes in how historic documents are used online for research, like genealogy and land titles.

I know firsthand that Texans benefit from increased use of telecommunications technology.

Yet for that to happen, our country's telecom laws must be modernized. An industry that moves at the speed of light cannot endure under horse-and-buggy regulations.

While 1996 may not seem like a long time ago, from a technological standpoint, it's practically prehistoric. In 1996, when America's telecom laws were last updated, the Internet and e-mail were in their infancy; brick-sized cell phones were a luxury item; and wireless technology was only a dream. Today, mobile phones are ubiquitous. U.S. Congress and state legislatures must regulate their use in cars, and movie theaters must run announcements urging people to turn them off.

The Internet is no longer simply a communications tool; it's deeply woven into our everyday life. Can a student imagine doing research without the Internet?

So why are old, outdated telecom laws getting in the way of exciting new technologies on the horizon?

It's time for the U.S. Senate and House to unite in favor of a technology-neutral policy that encourages head-to-head market competition across the board. By freeing all companies to invest, innovate and compete vigorously for their customers, Texans will experience a new revolution in telecommunications technology that will help businesses compete globally and connect Texans with the world.

On the horizon are innovative new services, more consumer choices, increased telecommuting, distance-learning opportunities, and rural access to top doctors through tele-medicine capabilities.

A wide range of next-generation broadband-enabled video and voice services also will become available.

These are only a few of the benefits we can envision. Who knows what else modern telecom competition could trigger if allowed to flourish?

From my years as a state senator, I also strongly believe that we must have a telecom policy that supports the vital needs of a community, such as local law enforcement, e-911 and universal service. The Universal Service Fund is an equalizing resource that ensures our rural residents and those living on a fixed income have affordable access to a dial tone. I firmly believe these priorities must not be given short shrift when our telecom policy is overhauled.

There must be shared industrywide responsibility for upholding these national goals that help keep our communities secure.

I hope our Texas delegation will work actively with other members of Congress to ensure that our nation's telecom laws are comprehensively updated.

Consumer-driven competition is the key to a technologically vibrant future that strengthens our communities and makes Texas an even greater place to live.

Jerry Patterson is commissioner of the Texas General Land Office.